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Kurt Vonnegut in the U.S.S.R.

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Kurt Vonnegut in the U.S.S.R.

by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2012

Kurt Vonnegut in the U.S.S.R.

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

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Since the mid-twentieth century, Kurt Vonnegut has enjoyed a permanent spot on the list of history's most widely read and beloved American authors. Science fiction classics like *Cat's Cradle* (1963) and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) turned Vonnegut into a domestic counter-cultural literary sensation in the United States at mid-century. The presence of a loyal Vonnegut fan base in America, and in the west more broadly, is a well-documented fact. What is less well known among scholars and those familiar with Vonnegut's work is his popularity in a far more distant place: the Soviet Union. Beginning in the late 1960s, Soviet citizens developed a voracious appetite for Vonnegut's literature. Translations of his novels appeared regularly in daily newspapers and highbrow literary journals alike; a play adaptation of *Slaughterhouse-Five* enjoyed a multi-season run in the Moscow Army Theater; average citizens competed for membership in Vonnegut's *karass.* These examples are suggestive of the ways that Kurt Vonnegut's science fiction literature can serve as a

gateway for scholars seeking to understand the Soviet Union during the 1970s. This report contends that Soviet interest in Vonnegut's dystopian science fiction reflected larger shifts in Soviet attitudes towards pacifism, technology, individual wellbeing, human rights, and past and present wars. It situates these ideas in the context of domestic and global events to illustrate how the peculiar political conditions of the 1970s made this ideological convergence possible. It employs original American and Russian language sources, including Russian newspapers and journals, letters written by Vonnegut's Russian translator, and Kurt Vonnegut's own fan mail. At its core, this report challenges the assumption that political and ideological differences precluded Soviet and American citizens from identifying the conditions necessary for ensuring social and technological progress and a future without war.

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Introduction

Since the mid-twentieth century, Kurt Vonnegut has enjoyed a permanent spot on the list of history's most widely read and beloved American authors. Science fiction classics like *Player Piano* (1952) *Cat's Cradle* (1963) and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), turned Vonnegut into a domestic counter-cultural American icon, the informal spokesperson for a generation of readers who found in Vonnegut's honest, humorous, humble, and humanistic prose an escape from the disillusioned, war-weary world around it. The author's background as an Indiana native and World War II veteran, combined with his openly leftist worldview, earned him broad appeal: both Midwestern conservatives and northeastern liberals found meaning in his work during a period known for its partisan politics and domestic upheaval.[1] That Vonnegut - who, it should be noted, invented a religion, Bokononism, for those who believe religions are absurd - quickly became a literary saint in his native country is a well-documented fact. What is far less well known is the popularity he enjoyed in a politically and ideologically distant place: the Soviet Union.

Ever since the 1967 publication of *Player Piano*, the first of his science fiction books to be translated in the Soviet Union, Vonnegut enjoyed tremendous critical

[1] A quick glance at Vonnegut's enormous collection of fan mail underscores just how diverse his American fan base was at the height of his literary career. In a single year, he received requests to speak at the Harvard Jewish Law Students Association, a donation request from the Port Clinton, Ohio Federation of Teachers (to whom Vonnegut sent a poster as a show of support), and fan mail from a self-described "macho," homophobic, juvenile delinquent from a dysfunctional military family from New Jersey. See VONN, Box 2, Folder 4 ("Correspondence: 1981, January - May), Folder 5 ("Correspondence: 1981, June-Dec."), Folder 6 ("Correspondence: 1982, January").

and popular success in the U.S.S.R. When Raisa Rait-Kovaleva, one of Russia's most celebrated and experienced translators of English language literature, translated both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Cat's Cradle* into Russian in 1970, the publications that followed amounted to nothing short of a major cultural event. "Virtually overnight, Vonnegut became the most popular contemporary Russian writer in the USSR," recalled Donald F. Fiene, a Professor of Slavic Languages and Literature at the University of Knoxville who was living and conducting scholarly research in Moscow at the time. Fiene, a close friend of Rait-Kovaleva (who almost always went by her Anglicized named, Rita Rait) remembered how, on a trip to the Soviet Union in December of 1975, every educated, well-read Russian he met professed to being a Vonnegut fan. "All were quite beguiled by Vonnegut's idea of the karass," he recalled, referring to the organizing principle, or "team," cited in the *Book of Bokonon*, that ignores national, institutional, occupational, familial, and class boundaries. "If you find your life tangled up with somebody else's life for no very logical reason," wrote Vonnegut, "that person may be a member of your karass."[2] Fiene recalled how:

> Thousands of Russians became convinced that they were members of Vonnegut's karass...One journalist in his thirties solemnly assured me that he just *knew* he and Vonnegut were in the same karass. He dreamed of the time he might meet the author and inform him of this

[2] Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* (New York: Dial Press Trade Paperback, 2010), 2.

> fact. On another occasion, a young woman instructor from Moscow University suggested meeting her for lunch at the Saturn tea shop in downtown Moscow because it suggested the setting of *The Sirens of Titan* and was thus an appropriate meeting place for those, like herself, who aspired to membership in Vonnegut's karass.[3]

In the winter of 1975-6, theatergoers flocked to the Soviet Army Theater to see *Stranstviia Billi Piligrima* (*The Wanderings of Billy Pilgrim*), a play adaptation of Rita Rait's translation of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Critics heaped endless praise on the production while theatergoers filled seats night after night, leading the theater to extend the play's run to meet popular demand.[4] As these accounts show, Russia's appetite for Vonnegut was nothing short of voracious.

These few examples are suggestive of the ways in which a full examination of Kurt Vonnegut's science fiction literature can serve as a gateway for scholars seeking to understand the Soviet Union, and especially its relationship with the west, during the 1970s. Although extant scholarship has focused primarily on socio-political cleavages between these two countries, a number of scholars have begun to link the international cultural icons like Kurt Vonnegut to a broader set of issues in

[3] Donald M. Fiene, "Kurt Vonnegut as an American Dissident: His Popularity in the Soviet Union and His Affinities with Russian Literature," in *Vonnegut in America: An Introduction to the Life and Work of Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald L. Lawler (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1977) 258-293, 259.
[4] Ibid.

the history of Cold War political and cultural trends. While his own life story and literary success in his native country reveal much about the United States and the counter-cultural conditions in the middle part of the twentieth century, Kurt Vonnegut's trajectory can be studied to great profit by scholars interested in the history of human rights, pacifist ideology, and debates over the role of science and technology in modern society as they unfolded in the Soviet Union. This thesis will focus on this overlooked latter component: Kurt Vonnegut's reception in the Soviet Union from 1967 to 1976. For it is really at this international level that the universality of Vonnegut's message had particular resonance.

Chapter One:

Kurt Vonnegut's Dissemination and Popularity in the U.S.S.R.

Translation and Circulation

In August of 1966, Donald M. Fiene, a doctoral student in Russian at Indiana University, picked up a copy of Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Almost immediately after beginning the book, he was struck by the story's Dostoevskian qualities: its emphasis on the importance of human kindness and chiliastic style. Fiene shared his thoughts on the matter with Raisa Rait-Kovaleva, a Russian translator of contemporary American literature, whom he had befriended in 1961 during the years he spent conducting dissertation research in the U.S.S.R. "Somehow for me, Vonnegut and Russian literature just naturally went together," Fiene recalled nearly a decade later. "Inside my brain they produced a cosmic epiphany. And I saw it as my sacred obligation to persuade my Soviet friend Rita Rait to read the works and translate them into Russian."[5]

Rita Rait was seventy years old when Fiene gave her a copy of *Cat's Cradle*. Her reaction to Vonnegut's writing was unequivocal. "I am quite delighted by this writer," she wrote Fiene shortly after completing her translation. "He is awfully like me in the way he thinks and talks. I myself talk like that in Russian and, when I can, in English as well."[6] What Rait was referring to was the novel's casual, honest, silly, and occasionally vulgar tone, a feature that spoke to her own personality and

[5] DMF, "Fiene, Donald, Writings; printed," "First Meetings," 90.
[6] FEIN, RRK to DMF, 17 November, 1969, Donald M. Fiene Papers, "Rait-Kovaleva Correspondence, 1968-78." Translation mine.

everyday experiences. "I am in love with Vonnegut - I like his simplicity, goodness, and wisdom," she expanded in a letter she sent the following year while working on her translation of *Slaughterhouse-Five.*[7]

Rait was no stranger to American irony and wit. In the early 1950s, she translated J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* into Russian, launching his career as a Russian literary sensation and securing for him a cult following within the upper layers of Russia's big-city intelligentsia. But even Rait recognized that Vonnegut's novels, in particular those that were translated into Russian and circulated in the Soviet Union during the late sixties and early seventies offered something different that distinguished Vonnegut from both his American countercultural contemporaries and his sci-fi predecessors in the USSR. Immediately after putting the book down, Rait secured a contract from the Soviet publishing house *Molodaia Gvardiia* ("Young Guard") to translate the book into Russian. Just ten years earlier, *Molodaia Gvardiia* introduced Russian readers to the novels of J.D. Salinger and Bernard Malamud when it released Rait's translations of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Maid's Shoes*. "Hip hip, hurray! I'm finally translating *Cat's Cradle*!!!!!" she wrote to Fiene in July of 1969. "I will finish it toward November – but after that will follow still many stages, as in a flight to the moon." Rait had apparently adopted Vonnegut's penchant for astronomical metaphors and

[7] FEIN, RRK to DMF, 3 February, 1970, Donald M. Fiene Papers, "Rait-Kovaleva Correspondence, 1968-78." Translation mine.

began incorporating cosmic references into her everyday vocabulary.[8]

As she translated *Cat's Cradle*, Rait struggled but ultimately managed to preserve as much of Vonnegut's original as possible. She found many suitable equivalents for most of Vonnegut's puns and sarcastic remarks, but certain words and expressions completely eluded her. "What is a 'Hoosier'? And how do you pronounce it?" she asked Fiene, referring to Indiana University's college mascot (the grandfalloon, or false karass, referenced in *Cat's Cradle*). "What is Spencer County? A Prairie Stater (is it in Texas?)? The International Order of Odd Fellows?" Like Jonah, the protagonist of *Cat's Cradle*, Rait quite literally could not comprehend the meaning of these false karasses.[9] The occasional profanity had to be diluted in order to meet the requirements of the Soviet censors. "Of course, I had to take out all the four-letter words from [Slaughterhouse-Five], but I replaced them with such euphemisms that everyone will understand what the soldiers are really saying."[10] In her translation of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, for example, "he took his pecker out" cleaned up as "he unzipped his pants" ("rasstegnul shtani"), and "man, you sure had a hard-on" was reborn as "well, brother…it looks like you've been dreaming" ("nu, bratik…vidno bilo shto tebe snilos").[11] However in the end, Rait managed to honor the spirit, if not the reality, of Vonnegut's authentic

[8] FEIN, RRK to DMF, 24 July, 1969, Donald M. Fiene Papers, "Rait-Kovaleva Correspondence, 1968-78." Emphases original. Translation mine.
[9] Ibid.
[10] FEIN, RRK to DMF, 3 February, 1970, Donald M. Fiene Papers, "Rait-Kovaleva Correspondence, 1968-78." Translation mine.
[11] Lauren G. Leighton, "Rita Rait-Kovaleva's Vonnegut: A Review Article," *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Winter 1980), 412-419, 413.

voice, all the while infusing the text with the occasional Russian flourish. "Is there an English equivalent for 'Bokononisms' like karass, Wampeter, Boko-maru?" she asked Fiene, only to decide that it would be best to translate them phonetically ("They sound just fine in Russian," she reassured him). For the dialogue spoken on the island of San Lorenzo, she chose to mimic, somewhat offensively, the way a Japanese spoke Russian. "I substituted the letter 'R' where there's a letter 'L': for example, 'riterature' instead of 'literature.'" She worried about translating the word "Hoosier" phonetically because it contained the Russian word for "worse,"[12] which she thought might offend "the good people of Indiana." When it was time to turn in a final draft to her publisher, however, the phonetic version was left as is.[13]

When Rita Rait finished translating *Cat's Cradle* into Russian in 1969*,* she expressed extreme satisfaction with the job she had just completed. "I am glad that Kurt fell into my experienced hands," she told Fiene. Rait's publishers were so certain that readers would respond favorably to *Cat's Cradle* that they handed Rait a contract to begin translating *Slaughterhouse-Five* the same day that she submitted her first translation. "Great news! I finished translating *Cat's Cradle* and handed it into the publisher, and I have already signed a contract for [*Slaughterhouse-Five*] and have begun to translate it!!!!" she wrote Fiene in November 1969, months before Russian

[12] In Rait's translation, "Hoosier" appears as "хужер," which contains the Russian word "хуже," meaning "worse." See Kurt Vonnegut, *Kolybel dlia Koshki* [translation from the English by Rita Rait-Kovaleva], (Moscow: Onyx, 2004). Translation mine.
[13] FEIN, RRK to DMF, 31 August, 1969, Donald M. Fiene Papers, "Rait-Kovaleva Correspondence, 1968-78." Translation mine.

readers got their first taste of Vonnegut's apocalyptic humor that following year.[14] As with *Player Piano*, Rait had trouble finding equivalents for some of the words in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. She wrote to Fiene asking for definitions for Pall Malls, 7-Up, zap gun, Xerox, crankcase drainings, and barbershop quartets. These, too, were translated more or less phonetically. "I am quite delighted by this writer. He is awfully like me in the way he thinks and talks," referring to Vonnegut's dark humor and occasional swearing. "I myself talk like that in Russian and, when I can, in English as well." In fact, she even began to use classic Vonnegut expressions in her everyday life. In one letter, she called Vladimir Nabokov an "old fart" after he called Boris Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago* "third-rate and clumsy" to a Swiss newspaper, and said that he "gets off" on criticizing writers from his native country.[15] As these comments suggest, Russian readers like Rait believed that Vonnegut and they spoke the same language, both literally and figuratively. Not only did Vonnegut's characters swear and joke like they did, but they spoke clearly and honestly about topics both lighthearted and serious. According to Rait:

> The young people here love Kurt not for the transitory things in his writings, but for the permanent ones, unchanging in value, that the author understands and that he tells about so beautifully, so engagingly, so masterfully. They love him for the same reason I do: for

[14] FEIN, RRK to DMF, 17 November, 1969, Donald M. Fiene Papers, "Rait-Kovaleva Correspondence, 1968-78." Emphasis original. Translation mine.
[15] Ibid.

> "that unwavering band of light" that he sees in every living creature…They love Kurt because he invented "karass" and "duprass" and explained the utter emptiness of "grandfalloons" everywhere in the world…They adore him for that gift of 'eternal childhood' that he preserved within himself; for the fact that he feels pity for all human beings; that he has almost no "villains" in his works; that he knows how to laugh—and is also laconic; that he is a great master of *style*, one of the best representatives of "naked prose" free of cute ornamentation; that despite certain "risqué expressions," he is a man deeply chase, *very pure*. I am proud that to me fell the great honor of being his translator, of bringing to my friends – and they are now also Kurt's friends – all the charms of his works and – if I may express it so – the beauty of his soul. He wrote for me in a book: "Cat's Cradle: So many different people in the same device. You are the only person I have ever acknowledged as a member of my karass."[16]

Vonnegut's Audience

When they first burst onto the Soviet literary scene in the late 1960s, Russian

[16] FEIN, RRK to DMF, 26 March, 1977, Donald M. Fiene Papers, "Rait-Kovaleva Correspondence, 1968-78." Emphasis original. Translation mine.

translations of books like *Player Piano* and *Cat's Cradle* catered to a qualitatively different audience than the sci-fi novels that became extremely popular around the time of the Russian Revolution. Vonnegut's books, like earlier sci-fi, were also published for the average working class man or woman, but his "proletariat" was of a different breed. The typical Soviet Vonnegut reader fit somewhere in between "conformist" and "reformist," a broad demographic that can be explained by a brief look at the current conditions in Brezhnev's Russia at the time of Vonnegut's literary debut.

Where his books were published speaks to the general makeup of Vonnegut's intended audience. Most of his books and short stories circulated in serious adult publications, like *Literaturnaya Gazeta* and *Novy Mir*, while others were published or excerpted in youth publications like *Molodaia Gvardiia* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. While it is unclear whether Communist Party members passed around copies of *Cat's Cradle* during Politburo sessions, it is clear that they condoned their circulation. The very fact that writers for state organs like *Izvestiia*, *Zvezda*, *Innostrannaia Literatura*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, and *Trud* reviewed Vonnegut's books indicates that Vonnegut was no underground phenomenon. Their published translations and reviews signaled to the average Russian reader that he or she was allowed to read and discuss Vonnegut's books in the open, a luxury not afforded to novels written by "subversive" authors like Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Boris Pasternak. This should not be taken as evidence that Vonnegut's novels were easy to procure. To the contrary, even Rait had trouble getting ahold of extra copies of her own translated

stories due to their limited circulation after their initial publication. Neither does it presuppose that Russian readers had license to interpret the author's message, themes, and ideas as they wishes. To the contrary, writers who reviewed and featured Vonnegut's books in their work gave average readers an unofficial "road-map" for them to consult as they read Vonnegut, the contents of which will be addressed in the pages that follow.

Chapter Two:

"Kurt Vonnegut Knows Our Country Well":

Kurt Vonnegut's Reception in the U.S.S.R.

With the fact of his popularity established, the question of *why* Russians read Vonnegut remains. To answer it, I will examine the language, rhetoric, and references that his readers used when they spoke about him and his novels. Cultural sensations, after all, are not born in a vacuum. Rather, they evolve into being because they capture the mood of a people or society at a specific time and speak to their thoughts, hopes, or fears in a unique and meaningful way. Catalysts, including the media, intellectuals, and even those in power, often facilitate this process by way of promotion, but people's capacity to select, consume, and be moved by a cultural object - whether it be a novel, song, or political message - on his or her own terms should be neither underestimated nor taken for granted.

When it came to Kurt Vonnegut's reception in the U.S.S.R, a combination of all of these factors help explain the author's critical and popular success. His trajectory, in many ways, resembled that of many other authors whose works were deemed appropriate by the cultural ministry: the state allowed his novels to be published, the state-run media promoted them, and Soviet society embraced them. This chapter explores precisely what it was about Vonnegut's books that granted him this seemingly unfettered access to the hearts and minds of the Soviet people. It argues that Vonnegut's unique breed of science fiction, one based on a layered

commentary about past and present wars, pacifism, and the role of technology in society, both mirrored and provoked new debates taking place in the Soviet Union in the late sixties and early seventies. In some cases, these debates conformed to party ideology; in other cases, they strayed far from it. Either way, Vonnegut storylines, characters, and overall philosophy inspired his Russian readers – both average citizens and those with close ties to party ideology – to think about their past, present, and future in new and bold ways.

Early Science Fiction in the Soviet Union

Kurt Vonnegut's earliest novels were not the first works of science fiction to become popular in the USSR. Indeed, Soviet critics and readers alike had been fascinated by the science fiction genre since the Soviet Union's earliest days. Richard Stites, in his pioneering book *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*, traces the history of the Soviet Union's fascination with science and technology. Especially whetted was its appetite for "the cult of the machine," a manifestation of what Stites described as "a desire to fit the rhythms, sensibilities, and creative dynamics of the human body to those of industrial, agricultural, and cyber machines."[17] "Soviet Russia," Stites wrote, "glorified science and worshipped machines."[18] This captivation with all things mechanic was anchored in an urban utopic vision, a belief that social justice can and will be achieved by replacing Russia's traditional village model with the city,

[17] Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 158.
[18] Ibid, 169.

machine, and computer. The factory will function not just as an arena of production but also a moral gymnasium for the exercise of good character. A socialist welfare state, meanwhile, will protect the individual from becoming the much-feared cog in the machine.

Popular fantasies gave birth to an entire literary genre dedicated to optimistic futuristic projections, what Stites aptly called "speculative fiction." Novels like Alexander Bogdanov's *Red Star* (1908) and V.D. Nikolsky's *In a Thousand Years* (1927) tried to envision what a communist society might, should, and would look like in post-industrial Russia after its transition into socialism was complete. This heaven would be created by workers' hands, governed by a progressive, centralized state, and premised on a vision of a united globe, adorned by unimaginable technological perfection, human social justice, and equity. In the context of world science fiction, this sort of optimism was unique. While western authors like H.G. Wells and Jules Verne wrote books about technology, adventure, and exoticism, they portrayed a negative utopia, or "dystopia." These dystopic books, along with Soviet versions like Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We,* did attract both a critical and popular following, but they were the exceptions to the rule. Average citizens living in post-revolutionary Russia were simply not in the mood to spend their free time reading about technological calamity, police states, and alien takeovers of planet earth. Only after decades of utopic dreaming failed to materialize in reality, and the Stalinist lull in literary production and consumption came to an end, did books of this order became a mainstream part of the Soviet literary world. By the late 1960s, Kurt

Vonnegut's time had finally come.

Inside Vonnegut's novels, Soviet readers encountered story lines, characters, and events that questioned the entire concept of utopia and parodied those individuals who dedicated their lives to looking for it. Vonnegut's futuristic narratives - which included cosmic voyages to fictional islands and planets, time travel, cities run by robots, and past and future wars - depicted an absurd world rife with social, political, and economic chaos. Violence and discord became a staple of Vonnegut's novels, an inconvenient yet unavoidable part of life embodied by Vonnegut's trademark expression "and so it goes." The only way to cope with the disorder around you, he told his readers, was to be good-natured and generous to your fellow man. "There's only one rule that I know of, babies," Eliot Rosewater, the protagonist of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, wrote as part of a baptismal speech for his neighbors' twins: "God damn it, you've got to be kind."[19]

Despite Vonnegut's fictional flourishes, pessimism, and sometimes naïve idealism, Vonnegut fans read his books not as absurd, dark, and entertaining fiction, but as serious, cautionary tales of mankind's capacity for destruction: warnings for people living in the present day to heed as they contemplated the future. "If what we are referring to is the essence of the book - its science-fictional (that is, it's unbelievable) themes," wrote one reviewer in the afterword to the Russian translation of *Player Piano*, "then one could say that fantastical elements loom no larger in this book than in any historical novels about the United States during the

[19] Kurt Vonnegut, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (New York: Dell Fiction, 1965), 129.

nineteenth century and even the present day."[20] In his stories, Russians found warnings of man's inherent culpability, his capacity to act unreasonably and against all logic. They believed that simply reading Vonnegut's novels made them that much better equipped to cope with the problems, both present and future, around them:

> After finishing the book, the reader thinks to himself, where have all the normal, smart people gone? The answer is simple: There are many smart and normal people in the world. They're just the ones who have read [Vonnegut's] book, laughed with it, thought about it, and then became as afraid as he is.[21]

As these comments suggest, Russians read Vonnegut not for the fictional, fantastical, and outer-worldly anecdotes scattered throughout his novels, but for his grim diagnoses of present day life and the prescriptions he offered for a better tomorrow. Vonnegut, in many ways, became as infallible as a prophet for this generation of Soviet readers as Marx and Lenin were for the revolutionary generation. This perspective departed considerably from the way people in the

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[20] Igor Bestuzhev-Lada, "Kogda lishnim stanovitsia chelovechestvo [When Mankind Becomes Superfluous]." Foreword to *Utopiia 14* [Utopia 14], by Kurt Vonnegut. Translated by M. Brukhov. Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1967.

[21] V. Skorodenko, "O bezumnon more i pozitsii khudozhnika (Roman K. Vonnegata *Kolybel' dlia Koshki*) [On the Absurd World and the Position of the Artist (K. Vonnegut's Novel *Cat's Cradle*)]." Afterword to *Kolybel' dlia Koshki* [Cat's Cradle] by Kurt Vonnegut. Translated by Raisa Rait-Kovaleva. Moscow: Molodaia Gvardia, 212-224. Translation mine.

United States read and understood Vonnegut. In the United States, Vonnegut readers reveled in the author's dark humor, sarcasm, and outlandish social commentary. They considered him a humorist first and a social visionary second, an entertainer rather than a serious thinker. American youth, to be sure, worshipped him (he did, for a brief period to time, become the reluctant cultural leader of the anti-war movement at the height of the Vietnam War) but the most influential literary critics generally dismissed him as a paperback-novelist, a pop culture sensation whose moment in the spotlight they predicted would surely pass. Soviet critics were aware of Americans' perception of Vonnegut and used it as an opportunity to portray themselves as more capable of relating to and understanding Vonnegut. "Critics in the United States believe that the author is dishonorable and disrespectful, that he takes things too lightly and not seriously enough," wrote one reviewer. "European critics have called him the 'King of Dark Humor' when his writings are as serious as the blues music of Ella Fitzgerald, who once sad, 'I laugh on purpose, sweetie, just so I won't cry.'"[22] With the Cold War serving as a backdrop, the question of "who understand Vonnegut better" became yet another playing field on which the Soviet Union and the United States could compete.

Vonnegut's Russian critics had much to say about his writing, and overall, they received him extremely well. Critics and average readers who read his novels and attended the plays that they inspired heaped immense praise on Vonnegut's style, message, and character. "This author is a genius," wrote the author of the

[22] Ibid.

afterword of the Russian translation of *Cat's Cradle.*[23] Almost immediately after he burst onto the Soviet literary scene, Vonnegut's critics began to compare him to universally acclaimed authors like Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Jonathan Swift, E.E. Cummings, and J.D. Salinger[24], references made all the more peculiar by the fact that the most high-brow literary establishments in the United States dismissed him for being a pop culture sensation and a not-so-serious writer.[25] This section will examine the rhetoric that Vonnegut's Russian fans - critics and general readers alike - used when they talked about his novels, and use them as a base to reflect on changes in political, economic, and social conditions that existed in the USSR during the 1970s.

Vonnegut on War

Kurt Vonnegut's incisive critique of past and present wars made a lasting impression on his Russian readers. Indeed, out of all of his political and social musings, it was his portrayal of the horrors, emptiness, and downright absurdity of war that became his greatest moral and intellectual legacy behind the Iron Curtain. Some readers associated him with the anti-Vietnam War movement in the United States and used him as a source of anti-American propaganda. Others considered his novels to be required reading for younger Russians to consult in order to learn

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[23] Ibid.
[24] Alexander Borshagovskii, "Takie Dela… [So It Goes…]," *Literaturnaia Gazeta* (15 VII 1970), 13. Translation mine.
[25] In her scathing review of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Joyce Carol Oats called the book "highly artificial, glib, [and] picaresque," a bunch of "nonsense" whose storyline failed to conform to the basic rules of fiction. See Joyce Carol Oats, "Fiction Chronicle," *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Autumn, 1969), 535-536.

about the damage that Hitler inflicted on their country. Vonnegut's preoccupation with World War II no doubt contributed to his popularity. The time Vonnegut spent as a G.I. in World War II lent him credibility among his Russian readers and ingratiated him that much more among his Russian fans. In their reviews, critics almost always referred to his brave service in the fight against Nazi Germany and his tragic experience as a witness of the bombing of Dresden. World War II became Vonnegut's trademark, so much so that Russians started to use Billy Pilgrim's wartime experience as a lens through which to reimagine their country's own historical narrative. At times, these reinterpretations conformed to Cold War rhetorical standards. Other times, they reflected a refreshing change in the way his readers drew a distinction between "good" and "evil," In both cases, Vonnegut's prose offered new, contemporary ways for Russians to understand their country's history, present, and future, ones that reflected the changing mood and trends of the decade.

Anti-War Rhetoric in *The Wanderings of Billy Pilgrim*

In the winter of 1975-1976, Mark Rovosky and Yuli Mikhailov, two of Russia's most celebrated playwrights, staged *The Wanderings of Billy Pilgrim* (*Stranstviia Billy Pilgrim*), a play adaptation of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in Moscow's Soviet Army Theater. Even with Rita Rait's consultative help, the directors faced considerable challenges when they decided to re-imagine the popular novel for the stage. Not only did they run the risk of being compared to - and almost certainly fall short of - the beloved Vonnegut when in came to writing quality and style, they had

to find a way to take a story that existed primarily in the cosmos, and hence the reader's boundless imagination, and relocate it to the limiting, tangible confines of the Soviet stage. In 1975, Russia lacked a fantasy theater tradition. "We really don't have a theater of the absurd," a Moscow woman active in the Russian theater explained to a reporter at the time. "When symbolism occurs, [we] see it literally," she continued. Pressure to tow the official party line, all the while remaining loyal to Vonnegut's politically subversive original script, only added to Rovosky and Mikhailov mounting obstacles.[26]

Yet the playwrights steered a clever course in their rendition of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Rather than run the risk of ruining the novel for their audience, or worse, getting charged with anti-Soviet agitation by government officials, the playwrights decided to play it safe. They chose to stage a play that, though advertised as an adaptation of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, turned out to be only loosely based on Vonnegut's original. Although it took its lead from a distinctly western novel, *The Wanderings of Billy Pilgrim* was a mostly Soviet affair: a tale rooted more in the socialist realist tradition than the black humor, farce, and zaniness for which Vonnegut was known both in the east and the west. Rovosky and Mikhailov retained Billy Pilgrim's casualness to death and bumbling, good-natured weaknesses - the character traits that were ultimately responsible for his fellow soldiers' capture by the Germans - but they did away with those traits that compromised the image of Billy as the strong anti-war hero, the staunch critic of war that Rovosky and Mikhailov seemed to

[26] David K. Shipler, "Vonnegut's 'Slaughterhouse-Five' Staged in Moscow," *New York Times*, 13 January, 1976, 43.

think Vonnegut intended his protagonist to be. Billy's childish fear of falling into the Grand Canyon, for example, went without mention, as did his early fascination with violence and the non-military encounters with violence that were so formidable for his personal and intellectual development: his father's death in a hunting accident, his wife's accidental death from carbon monoxide poisoning, his father in law's death in a plane crash that Billy alone survived. As one American in the audience wrote at the time, "[the play] is a slightly zany but nonetheless realistic story of a pitiable American driven mad by the horrors of his wartime experience."[27]

The playwrights' decision to erase Billy Pilgrim's right-wing sympathies offers some clues about their artistic and political motives. In *Slaughterhouse-Five,* Billy Pilgrim floats back and forth in time, in out of the sweet and painful episodes of his life, contemplating a set of morals and personal philosophies that he jettisons or simply ignores at the worst possible moments. The Billy Pilgrim of Rovosky and Mikhailov's play, on the other hand, was far more linear: he behaved as a wise veteran, critical of wars and the political system that sent him to fight them. In *The Wanderings of Billy Pilgrim*, there was no bumper sticker on Billy's Cadillac reading "Support Your Police Department," "Impeach Earl Warren," and "Reagan for President," and no speech at a Lions Club luncheon by a marine major calling for North Vietnam to be bombed back to the Stone Age. In the book, however, Billy feels no impulse to protest the bombing of Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam, and no revulsion at what he knows about bombing despite his witnessing of the bombing of

[27] Ibid.

Dresden. In Vonnegut's book, when a major is told that Billy's son is a Green Beret in Vietnam and suggests that Billy must be proud, Billy replies, "I am, I certainly am." The play reverses these sentiments. The son, in uniform, visits Billy in the hospital, and Billy mocks him, ridiculing his medals. The son even tries to grab his father and hit him. "Evidently, it is politically impossible for anyone on a Soviet stage to express pride in a Green Beret in Vietnam," remarked an attendee.[28]

Despite these considerable compromises, there proved to be no shortage of critical or popular praise for *The Wanderings of Billy Pilgrim* when it opened in 1976. In fact, the play was such a success that it returned to the Soviet Army Theater for two extra seasons. What explains the enthusiastic response that led to the play's extended run? It appears that the playwrights made the right decision when they chose to focus almost exclusively on *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s anti-war rhetoric. Indeed, *The Wanderings of Billy Pilgrim's* emphasis on Billy's war criticisms, especially those wars waged by western governments, was precisely what critics and audience members valued most about the performance. "Kurt Vonnegut knows our country well," wrote V. Simukov in a florid review of *The Wanderings of Billy Pilgrim* for the journal *Trud* [Labor]. "The author's humanistic and anti-militaristic pathos shine through in both the novel and the play." Simukov was particularly drawn to Billy's eyewitness account of the firebombing of Dresden and the personal crisis of conscience that it inspired. "After the massacre ended, Billy spent his days trying to understand why the Anglo-American forces, at the very end of the war, dropped

[28] Ibid.

bombs on the defenseless Dresden, a city that was at the time inhabited solely by peaceful citizens and prisoners of war. He simply could not find a reason for this senseless bombing" went Simukov's summary. Dresden, in this case, symbolized the entire the institution of war: a perverse and senseless exercise between nations performed at the expense of the very citizens that they claim to protect.[29]

Although he focused on the play's anti-militaristic commentary, Simukov made a point of highlighting the performance's other, more cheerful message: that despite his destructive potential, mankind is inherently good. He dedicated an entire paragraph in an otherwise pithy review to a summary of what appeared to have been the play's most memorable scene. In this scene, a group of POWs, still under the close watch of their Nazi captors, stage an outfitted performance of the fairytale "Cinderella." But whereas Vonnegut, in his novel, included the episode to draw the reader's attention to the prisoners' stage costumes, which were made from the clothing left over from the Nazis' Holocaust victims, the scene in *The Wanderings of Billy Pilgrim* made no reference to the Nazi-orchestrated genocide. According to Simukov's review, the scene was designed to have a qualitatively different effect on its audience. Rather than direct the audience's attention to the grotesque images of the past world war, the playwrights included the scene to convey a much more positive, optimistic message. Simukov recalled:

> The ["Cinderella"] performance produced a sense of optimism that quickly spread among the prisoners; not

[29] V. Simukov, "Stranstviia Billi Piligrima [The Wanderings of Billy Pilgrim]," *Trud*, 58 (10 III 1976), 4. Translation mine.

> even the terrifying conditions in which the POWs were being held could negate it. It is a wonder how the exhausted POWs were able to put on the play, how they were able to maintain their faith in people. Yet it was during this moment that Billy, after all of his "wanderings," realized that "Peace is better than fighting." It is this world principle that is at the center of the entire performance.[30]

As these comments suggest, members of the audience viewed *Stranstviia Billi Pilgrim* as more than just an expose on the horrors and senselessness of war. They saw it as proof that beauty and tragedy could coexist, that people could find ways to cope in even the most hopeless scenarios.

Another review, this one for the youth-oriented newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda,* emphasized the play's pacifying elements and the hope it evoked for a future without war. In his review of the play, V. Turovskiy called Vonnegut "a saint," a writer who did humanity a great service by forcing it to reckon with "the most eternal memory, that of war." Turovskiy seemed to be of the belief that the more reminders there are of the evils of war, the less likely the chance that society will wage another one in the future. At one point in his review, he suggests that war came to Europe in 1938 because "back in the 1930s, the world had never heard of Auschwitz, Babi-Yar, and Ravensbruch," three of the deadliest Jewish

[30] Ibid.

extermination sites. He praised Vonnegut's use of the word "slaughter" as a metaphor for the bombing of Dresden, deeming it a "stronger," more appropriate word given the context within which the author used it. Vonnegut's novel and the play that it inspired, Turovskiy predicted, would ensure that generations of readers do not forget the names Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. "As long as this memory exists, as long as it hurts - as long as the flame smolders inside all of us - there will not be another war," he told his readers. *The Wanderings of Billy Pilgrim*, as Turovskiy's remark shows, provided audience members like Turovskiy with more than just theatrical pleasure: it offered them large doses of optimism for a new epoch void of the conflict and destruction of the past half-century.[31]

Vonnegut, who had no involvement in the production of *The Wanderings of Billy Pilgrim*, came to the playwrights' defense when news broke out in the west that the play departed substantially from his original novel. Like members of the audience, Vonnegut praised the play's anti-war message as a sign of progress in U.S.-Soviet relations. "I would say that what's remarkable about this production is that its theme deals with pacifism," he told one reporter. "The Soviets have been reluctant to put on such plays, which makes the occasion most noteworthy." He even sent a "thank you" letter to the cast after they sent him an autographed poster of the playbill. Inside the letter, Vonnegut reinforced his trust in the playwrights' version, regret for not being able to attend the show on opening night, and the lifelong solidarity he felt with his Russian fans:

[31] V. Turovsky, "Liudi i teni ["People and Shadows"]," *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (6 II 1976), 2. Translation mine.

> The autographed poster [signed by all members of the play's cast] arrived today along with word your production is superb, faithful to my humble intentions and delightful to your audience...Nothing has made me so happy and proud. Place a chair in the wings for my soul on opening night -- my body must remain here. The Soviet Army saved my life in 1945, now they give me a theater. If I could enlist, I would. Much love to you my brothers and sisters in the arts. Signed Private Vonnegut, formerly U.S. Infantry, serial number 12102964.[32]

Revisiting the Past: Vonnegut on "The Great Patriotic War"

In his earliest works, Vonnegut wrote about a war that held a special place in the hearts of the Soviet people: World War II. Long before the Axis Powers surrendered in 1945, an entire commemoration enterprise materialized in Russia to honor the 26 million Red Army soldiers who sacrificed their lives to defend the Soviet Union from Hitler's army. National holidays, memorials, streets named after historic battles and generals, films, and songs trained generations of Russian citizens to accept the evilness of the German army and nobleness of the Allied - and especially Soviet - war effort. *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* were just two of the hundreds of titles to be inducted into the pantheon of Russia's World War II memorial industry.

[32] Ibid, Shipler.

However, these two novels offered something different, a World War II narrative that was more in tune with what was going on in the world in the first half of the 1970s. When *Novy Mir* published *Voinia nomer piat*, Rait's translation of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in 1970, shifts in superpower politics were creating new demand for anti-capitalist, and especially anti-American, rhetoric at home. The best pieces of anti-American propaganda were those that were being produced by Americans themselves. For instance, since the beginning of the American civil rights movement, Kremlin officials went out of their way to feature stories of police dogs attacking protesters and students being blocked from entering desegregated schools in the pages of *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* to shame the U.S. government for condoning discrimination against is own citizens. By the mid-1970s, prominent figures like Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and Muhammad Ali had become easily recognizable symbols of American injustice in Cold War Russia.[33]

Billy Pilgrim served the similar purpose of adapting the official World War II narrative to meet present-day ideological standards. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy narrates the story from the point of an American POW who witnessed the Allied firebombing of Dresden. The experience turned him into a victim of both German *and* Anglo-American aggression. He blamed Nazi Germany for imprisoning him in an underground meat locker in the city of Dresden, and the Anglo-American forces for attacking the defenseless and historic city where he was kept captive. He depicts

[33] For more on the impact of American domestic race relations on U.S.-Soviet relations, see Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

the Soviet Union, on the other hand, in an altogether different light by portraying the Red Army as the "noble liberator" that freed his fellow prisoners and him from their Nazi captors and protected the city from future Allied bombings. Indeed, this depiction comports with Vonnegut's countless personal recollections of the bombing, an act he described as "a total calamity of civilization" and "a modern day Pompeii." Vonnegut's fondness for his Russian liberators was so great that in 1967, he travelled to Moscow on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution to symbolize his gratitude for his Red Army liberators.[34]

Billy Pilgrim's portrayal in *The Wanderings of Billy Pilgrim* captures the essence of this reformatted narrative. In reviewing *Slaughterhouse-Five*, one writer seized the opportunity to condemn the United States for its moral depravity and hawkishness. The review began with the following anecdote:

> We first meet Billy in the veterans hospital, where he is seeking treatment because his understanding of the world and sense of justice seem 'abnormal' to those around him who are willing to go about their lives without unlocking the 'cryptic' logic behind the bombing of Dresden.[35]

Billy, according to Simukov's interpretation, fell victim not just to Anglo-American aggression during the Second World War, but to the "bourgeois" capitalist society

[34] Charles J. Shields, *And So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011), 225.
[35] Ibid, Simukov.

that he returned to once the war ended. "According to bourgeois moral standards," Simukov went on "it was high time for Billy to forget the old plague. Yes, it was shameful and inhumane, but so much time has passed! Billy, however, does not want to, and cannot, forget -- that's just the way he is." Through his summary of the play, Simukov depicts American society, with its shockingly low moral standards and lax attitude towards war, as having little patience for people who are incapable of recovering quickly from an event as traumatic as the firebombing of Dresden. Readers who followed this logic left the review with the impression that in the United States, sensible, morally upright individuals like Billy were deemed "abnormal" and thrown into the hospital, abandoned and left to face their haunting memories and emotional disabilities all on their own.[36]

In the Soviet Union, this sort of narrative served two distinct yet mutually reinforcing ideological purposes. First, it denied Soviet involvement in the firebombing of Dresden, a military campaign that had, over time, joined names such as Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the apex of military senselessness and human destruction. In the Soviet Union, Dresden was transformed into a symbol of what had divided the socialist east from the imperialist west. "The Soviets," wrote one West German author at the time, "want Dresden to be a 'beacon' in the struggle against the Americans."[37] Waging this struggle involved a great deal of revisionist history. The fact that the Soviet Union once called the United States an ally no

[36] Ibid, Simukov.
[37] Quoted in Richard Overy, "The Post-War Debate," in *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden 1945*, ed. Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang (London: Pimlico, 2006) 123-142, 134.

doubt troubled Kremlin ideologues. To this day, historians continue to debate the role that Soviet Union played in the decision to firebomb the city. Some of the different historiographical positions taken on this issue include: the Soviet Union begged Great Britain and the United States to bomb the city as retribution for German destruction on the Eastern Front; Great Britain and the United States destroyed Dresden to preclude the possibility of a Soviet occupation of the city after the war; Great Britain and the United States bombed Dresden to intimidate and facilitate negotiations with the Soviet Union during the Yalta conference; Great Britain and the United States bombed Dresden with the imperialistic motive of impeding Soviet progress in Germany and increasing the amount of territory that American and British forces would occupy once the war ended.[38] Richard Overy, an authority on Soviet involvement in World War II, has cited one British interpreter present at the Yalta conference who, in an account provided fifty years later, recalled "distinctly hear[ing] the Soviet chief of operations, General Alexei Antonov, request the bombing of Dresden and that the request was strongly endorsed by Stalin itself."[39] No matter their credibility, each possibility portrayed the Soviet Union negatively: as either a present or potential aggressor nation who was directly or indirectly responsible for the firebombing. In the ideological battle between benevolent socialist and imperialist capitalism, Billy Pilgrim's forgiving narrative served an indelible purpose.

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[38] Elizabeth A. Ten Dyke, *Dresden: Paradoxes of Memory and History* (London: Routledge, 2001), 84-5.
[39] Richard Overy, "The Post-War Debate," in *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden 1945*, ed. Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang (London: Pimlico, 2006) 123-142, 133-4.

Secondly, Vonnegut's storyline helped perpetuate the myth of Soviet victimhood, an integral part of the country's moral and historic fabric. Since the immediate postwar years, Kremlin leaders turned to this narrative time and time again to justify Soviet territorial and political aggrandizement. To preserve the sanctity of this story, whole areas of wartime life, including Red Army desertion, crime, cowardice, and rape, were banned from public scrutiny. Specific crimes, like the Katyn Forest massacre, in which the Soviet Secret Police (NKVD) executed between 21,768 to 22,000 members of the Polish Officer Corps, were buried under mountains of denial.

Revisionism of this kind did not dissipate once the territorial boundaries were finalized in Germany in 1961. To the contrary, the Cold War created even more demand for a narrative that would portray the Soviet Union, and Leonid Brezhnev's regime in particular, in a flattering light. To meet this demand, Brezhnev, an expert in Cold War ideological warfare, embarked on his own remake of the war epic with a whole new set and props. Lavish war monuments were installed in cities throughout the Soviet bloc, and entire museums were built to bolster the younger generation's relationship with this sacred war.[40] Brezhnev, who fought in Ukraine during the war, even published a book of wartime memories, entitled *Malaia Zemlia* [*"Little Land"*]. The book would go on to win the prestigious Lenin Prize in literature in 1978, an event seen by many as Brezhnev's attempt to associate his

[40] For more on the ideological legacy of World War II in the Soviet Union, see Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

name with the victory of the Great Patriotic War. More than thirty years after Allied victory, the need to remind the world of Russian sacrifice in World War II became all the more urgent in the fight for the future of socialism in the Cold War. Unbeknownst to Vonnegut, his very own Billy Pilgrim served as one such reminder.[41]

Reinterpreting the Present:

Vonnegut and the Emptiness of Cold War Rhetoric

In New York on the evening of July 23, 1975, Kurt Vonnegut sat down with the Soviet-Kyrgyz author Chingiz Aitmatov for a formal, televised interview to mark the successful completion of the Apollo-Soyuz Project, the first joint U.S.-Soviet space flight. The space mission, which was also the first spaceflight in which spacecraft from different nations docked in space together, was designed to celebrate nearly half a decade of peaceful coexistence between Russia and the United States, or détente. In pragmatic terms, Apollo-Soyuz was supposed to put an end to the Space Race between the superpowers, which went as far back as the Cold War itself. The entire docking mission was broadcast live on television and gave Americans and Russians on Earth a chance to witness in real-time such diplomatic as Apollo commander Thomas Stafford and Soyuz commander Alexei Leonov's initial handshake and their subsequent flag exchange, the signing of various international certificates, and the meals that the Russian and American crews

[41] Graeme Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 192.

shared.[42] On the day of the launch, crowds of Muscovites traveled to the GUM department store on the city's Red Square to watch the day's events on the television sets on display. Entire offices left for the day, first to GUM and then to nearby bars to celebrate the cheerful occasion.[43]

Reflecting on the space mission a week after its completion, Vonnegut and Aitmatov spoke of the event in equally optimistic terms. Each author acknowledged the great technological leaps made by the other author's country. "What we see now on our television screens is an amazing event," Aitmatov told Vonnegut. The Soviet author - who also served as editor of *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, where a translation of his conversation with Vonnegut was published shortly after it took place - recalled a recent conversation he had with his son about a passage in an autobiographical book he wrote in which he described seeing people plowing land using horse-drawn plows when he was growing up. "'Did they not have tractors?' [my son] asked me, to which I responded 'Yes, we did have tractors, but not enough of them, on account of the [Second World War].'" The wide generational gap, as these comments suggest, made the space mission seem all the more extraordinary.[44]

Yet for Aitmatov and Vonnegut, Apollo-Soyuz symbolized something qualitatively different, something much more significant than an encore of decades

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[42] For more on the Soyuz-Apollo mission, see Asif A. Siddiq, *The Soviet Space Race with Apollo* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).
[43] Christopher S. Wren, "Desert Lift-Off: Moscow Crowds See the Event Televised from Kazakhstan," 16 July, 1975, *The New York Times*, 77.
[44] Chingiz Aitmatov and Kurt Vonnegut, "Vstrecha nad planetoi zemlia: dialog sovetskogo i amerikanskogo pisatelei ("Meeting on Planet Earth: A Conversation with an American and a Russian Writer")], *Literaturnaya Gazeta* 30, 22-23.

of technological development and scientific innovation. The conversation quickly evolved into a discussion of the Cold War and precisely what the spaceflight meant for a world that continued to be divided, formally and politically, between east and west. For Aitmatov, the détente metaphor seemed apropos:

> Is this mission not a meaningful symbol and a promising start? Should we not use this moment as an opportunity to act in the face of conflict? What is happening right before our eyes is more than just a technical achievement. I see in this event as adding an important moral and ethical dimension to the relationship between our two countries. Just remember what our relationship was like in the postwar period…and now, together, we broke through the glass window of space. It is through this cosmic window that we will soon see each other in a different state, in another dimension.

Aitmatov saw the event as a vivid example of just how superficial Soviet-American hostilities had become:

> Not only are we sitting here watching what is going on in outer space, but we're actually involved in the same process, as people who represent two great nations with

> one goal in common: peaceful cooperation with one another.[45]

The situation, in many ways, seemed absurd: how can the Cold War even be called a "war" when individuals from each of the two warring nations could shake hands with one another not just on Earth, but in outer space as well. "I sit here and think: if there is no animosity in outer space, why must there be animosity here?" Aitmatov asked his peer. Vonnegut agreed, reassuring Aitmatov that "there's never any hostility among our citizens." He offered the following scenario: "If you stopped an average American walking on the street and asked him whether he hates Russians, he would be shocked: 'Why? Why should I hate Russians?'" The comment is quite telling. The conflict, from both Aitmatov and Vonnegut's points of view, existed in the minds of the statesmen who staked their countries and their reputation on its perpetuation. By the mid-1970s, the Cold War, in the eyes of American and Russian citizens, had lost its *raison d'être* and devolved into a grotesque status quo.[46]

Like Aitmatov, Russian readers discovered new ways to reinterpret their relationship with mankind when they read Vonnegut. Indeed, the author's unique brand of humanism appealed to a generation of readers who had been taught to view the world as a contest between good and evil: Bolshevism versus Menshevism, socialism versus fascism, communism versus capitalism. Vonnegut's world was far less binary. Nearly all of his characters were flawed – from Billy's violent past to

[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.

Felix Hoenniker's atomic discovery and Bokonon's evangelism – no matter their political or ideological affiliations, and his social critiques extended to democracies and dictatorships alike. At first, this came across as an alien concept. Could the distinction between "good" and "evil" be so flexible? When Rita Rait first embarked on her translation of Vonnegut's *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, she was struck by one of the play's most controversial scene. "As you know, I translated Vonnegut's play *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*," she wrote in a letter to Fiene. She continued:

> A lot of my friends read it…ALL of them agreed on one thing: the play is very interesting, people here may, in fact, like it, BUT THERE'S ONE THING that confused all of us: Kurt, in his typical paradoxical style, created one scene, set in "paradise," where EVERYONE – from Hitler to Christ – are all peacefully playing a game, for which I myself don't know the Russian word – something that appears to be hockey on grass. In our opinion, although we are not supposed to believe in heaven and hell, you cannot TREAT bad and good people the same way: even if it wasn't Doctor Koningswald's fault for being a Gestapo –for me this is not the case! – and you depict him as he is depicted in the scene, I think, that the author NEEDS TO HAVE A MORE SERIOUS ATTITUDE towards such

> inhumanity – especially in a play...and this is what I tried to tell Kurt in my letter to him…by quoting Shakespeare: "The evil that men do lives after them."[47]

In a letter written just two months later, Rait brought Fiene up to speed on the matter by summarizing a discussion she had with several of her colleagues at the Soviet Writers Union. It all started when Rait brought up a comment that Vonnegut had recently made to the press in which he said that society should not condemn returning Vietnam War soldiers for the violence they committed in battle: "My colleagues – who have no sense of humor – say that Kurt's tone was a little too 'light-hearted' and that, in general, [they disapproved of] his comments about how society should not criticize those soldiers coming home from war." Rait, having pondered over her interpretation of *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, showed signs of having had loosened her rigid moral stance. She wrote:

> See, <u>I completely agree with [Vonnegut], that we can't accuse</u> soldiers for the bad things that other people, like Looseleaf Harper in the play *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, do...But there's a difference between Major von Koningswald – in the play – and poor Looseleaf: Looseleaf understood that you <u>can't</u> behave this way, while Koningswald, who had nothing to AVENGE in the first place, simply does not want to understand...I

[47] FIEN, RRK to DF, 24 February, 1973, Donald M. Fiene Papers, "Rait-Kovaleva Correspondence, 1968-78." Emphases in original. Translation mine.

> do, however, understand the humor of this scene. But KURT HIMSELF, in *Slaughterhouse*, described the DIFFERENCE between Billy Pilgrim and the Gestapo bandits that fed needles to their dogs – very well...you can't hate ALL the Germans, ALL Jews, ALL Russians -- that would be simply idiotic. But you have to know, that GOOD AND BAD ARE ABSOLUTE, that this is the Golden Rule for Dostoevsky...and Faulkner and Salinger and Vonnegut and Kafka – all of them know and understand this – and that is why I love them and translate them.[48]

Although she was unwilling to jettison completely the idea of an "absolute good" and an "absolute evil," Rait, like Aitmatov and Vonnegut, acknowledged the existence of a moral "gray area" where "good" met "evil." It was in this gray area where individuals from opposite sides of the political and ideological spectrum – Hitler and Christ, Koningswald and Looseleaf, and even Rait and Kurt – found common ground through universal ideas, shared experiences, and personal bonds; a real life karass. Rait's newfound moral relativism, unbeknownst to her, challenged the legitimacy of the Cold War's bipolar framework, one that hinged on a divisive rhetoric that cultural and person-to-person exchange between east and west would eventually erode.

[48] FIEN, "Rait-Kovaleva Correspondence, 1968-1978," RRK to DF, 18 April, 1973. Emphases in original. Translation mine.

Looking to the Future:

Player Piano and the Future of Technology in the Soviet Union

The response to the 1967 Russian translation of *Player Piano*, the first of Vonnegut's novels to be translated into Russian, conveyed a basic distrust of science and technology, especially in relation to labor. This represented a significant departure from earlier Soviet attitudes that celebrated the mechanization of labor, military, and daily life. Earlier works had promoted the official view that scientific innovation would modernize Soviet industry and produce jobs for the average citizen, while technological development would make production more effective by way of mechanization. Vonnegut's novels, on the other hand, provoked readers to consider a considerably different point of view. Rather than depict science and technology as guarantors of the proletariat's liberation of the from the factories, farms, and frontlines, reaction to *Player Piano* voiced a palpable fear of the hallmark trait of the modern, first-world economy: machine-run factories, abandoned farms, and a bloated service sector, to name a few. This section will consider the Soviet response to *Player Piano*, the debate the novel provoked about the future of science and technology in the Soviet Union, and how those debates reflected larger intellectual within the Soviet scientific community in the age of human rights.

The foreword to the first Russian translation of *Player Piano* offers unique insight into debates taking place about the role that science and technology should play in the Soviet Union. *Player Piano*, the first of Vonnegut's novels to be released in the United States and translated into Russian, told the futuristic story of the city

of Ilium, New York, a post-World War III industrial center run by a small cabal of technocrats and their army of robots. Jobs for ordinary citizens in the industrial city were scarce. Just a few years earlier, robots had assumed a majority of the jobs left vacant after Ilium's human population had left to fight in the Third World War. After the war ended, veterans returned home only to learn that they were out of a job and had been relocated to a far-flung section of the city called "The Homestead." The factories, where so many Ilium residents used to work, required only a fraction of its human labor force once the machines had taken over. Robotic technology had evolved so much that even the service industry, once thought to be immune to automation, employed machines with human-like brains and emotions.[49]

Molodaia Gvardiia (Young Guard), the Central Committee of the All-Union Lenin Communist Youth League's literary publishing house, released a translation of *Player Piano*, or *Utopia-14* – the title given to an earlier edition of the novel - in 1967. The sociologist Igor Bestuzhev-Lada wrote the foreword to the translation and gave it the title "When Humans Become Superfluous" ["Kogda lishnim stanovitsia chelovechestvo"]. The choice of reviewer was by no means random. At the time, Bestuzhev-Lada headed the Department of Social Forecasting at the Russian Academy of Science's Institute of Sociology.[50] An expert in "social

[49] Summary of Kurt Vonnegut, *Player Piano* (New York: Random House Digital, Inc., 2011).
[50] Edward Cornish, *The Study of the Future: An Introduction to the Art and Science of Understanding and Shaping Tomorrow's World* (Bethesda: World Future Society, 1977), 251.

forecasting" and "futuristic studies," Bestuzhev-Lada used the event of *Player Piano*'s release to present his own ideas about the future of Russian industry, technology, and society to the Russian youth to whom Molodaia Gvardiia catered. He began his review by praising the novel and reflecting on its. After calling *Player Piano* "one of the most outstanding works of American science fiction," the reviewer went on to say that at times the book more closely resembled a work of non-fiction than typical sci-fi. "If what we are referring to is the essence of the book - its science-fictional (that is, its unbelievable) themes," he wrote, "then one could say that fantastical elements loom no larger in this book than in any historical novel about the United States during the nineteenth century and even the present day." The novel, according to Bestuzhev-Lada, chronicled a series of events that were already in the making in the United States. He elaborated:

> According to American economists and sociologists, if the number of people employed in industry and agriculture continues to decline at the same rate as it is now, no more than 10% of able-bodied people will be employed by the year 2000. At least 75% of the "active'" adult population will have to find work in the fields of trade and services, working for either the state, in public education, science, or other institutes.[51]

[51] Ibid, Bestuzhev-Lada.

For Bestuzhev-Lada, Vonnegut's dystopia was no dystopia at all, but rather a quite reasonable forecast of things to come in the not so distant future. From Bestuzhev-Lada's point of view, the futuristic city of Ilium, NY represented a slightly exaggerated version of the same social, political, and economic conditions as those found in present day American and Western European cities. From his point of view, the United States and the west in general were doomed to suffer the same fate as the city of Ilium if they failed to reverse the current trend of replacing human labor with machines. Capitalist countries, with their increasing dependence on computers, automobiles, and mechanized labor, were creating a situation where humans, like the title of the foreword said, were becoming superfluous. The Marxist reference is clear: unemployment and human un-productivity are inevitable in societies where an elite cabal of managers, technocrats, and machines control all means of productions. "Paradise," wrote Bestuzhev-Lada, "will continue to be the private ownership of the means of production, the continued exploitation of labor rights in the name of the profiting owner, and the capitalist economy." *Player Piano* essentially reiterated this inconvenient truth using Ilium as a stand-in for capitalist countries in general. *Player Piano*, in Bestuzhev-Lada's eyes, presented readers not with some absurdist and fictional dystopia, but an accurate portrayal of capitalism's most logical outcome, its final stage.[52]

What exactly did this final stage entail? Bestuzhev-Lada did not equivocate on this point. For him, the last stage of capitalism was not Lenin's imperialism, but

[52] Ibid.

rather, the post-World War III epoch depicted in Vonnegut's book, a society where man becomes disposable after being replaced by machines. According to Bestuzhev-Lada, the most pressing issue facing Western countries, and one that he feared could spread to the Soviet Union if they weren't careful, was the subordination of the industrial and agricultural sectors to the service industry. The major piece of evidence that Betsuzhev-Lada cites in his review is a French study published by a group of researchers called "Group 1985." In 1962, Charles de Gaulle's government commissioned Group 1985 to evaluate current social conditions in France and predict what French society might look like in the year 1985. Group 1985's conclusions, as cited in Bestuzhev-Lada's article, were as follows:

> The number of citizens employed in French industry will increase only slightly, from 8.2 to 9.6 million, while the number of those employed in agriculture will fall from 4.5 to 2.4 million. On the other hand, the number of people working in the trade and service sectors were projected to grow drastically: from 3.6 to 6 million, or approximately 66%.[53]

France, along with a score of other Western countries, ran the risk of becoming the city of Ilium.

> In economically developed countries, the mechanization and automation of social production –

[53] Ibid.

> especially in the industry and agricultural sectors – is eliminating millions and millions of jobs every year…We have become accustomed to reading about it in science fiction and fantasy novels, but we sometimes forget about the tragedy that capitalism causes in the lives of millions of people. Moreover, oftentimes we do not think about the apocalyptic scale that this process can take (that it is already beginning to take!) as machines continue to replace humans in Western countries in the coming decades.[54]

Along with the doomed economic forecast, Bestuzhev-Lada predicted great social costs, ones that would incurred when unemployed, able-bodied citizens were forced into monotonous service and trade jobs that require little to no mental energy, forcing their imaginations and creative impulses to atrophy from disuse. When machines begin to encroach on the service and trade sectors, as they do in *Player Piano,* the situation, from Bestuzhev-Lada's point of view, becomes "hopeless":

> The problem is that the gradual mechanization and automation of production does not limit itself to industry, agriculture, construction, transport, and communications. In fact, it goes deeper - though much slower and not on such a large scale - into the service

[54] Ibid.

> and trade industries, government work, scientific life, education, and so forth. Automation eventually becomes "cybernetization."[55]

He even offers an alternative title for the book: "The Story of How Automated and Cybernetized Production Processes Helped Monopoly Capitalism Reach its Logical Conclusion and Bring Man to the Point of Extinction."[56]

Bestuzhev-Lada does not go so far as denounce all forms of mechanized labor. Rather, he called for a balance between machine and humans, one that would ensure that progress was being made but would not compromise the moral and physical health of the individual. For example, he voiced his support for the development of machines that are capable of assuming uncreative types of mental work. "This in itself is great, a dream come true for humans," he wrote. "People are freed from heavy, monotonous, exhausting work (both physical and mention) and is able to strengthen his focus on complex forms of mental labor, like scientific, technical, and artistic creativity, the greatest sources of pleasure for all homosapiens." His one concern was that humans, in an attempt to "keep up" with the machines, might end up exhausting themselves in the process. "[Man needs] to spend a few hours a day exploring the treasures of literature, arts, and culture in general," Bestuzhev-Lada prescribed. "This is not just fun. This is necessary for creative productivity, for a person to remain human and not turn into a 'smart'

[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

machine himself."[57] According to Bestuzhev-Lada, man needed "to devote several hours a day to sport and physical activity. This is both fun and necessary for avoiding his physical (and moral) degeneration, for it allows him to remain a man and not turn into a Wellsian Morlock or Eloi."[58]

The notion that an individual should not sacrifice his physical or spiritual wellbeing in the name of national progress was a very new concept at this point in time. It is difficult to imagine stumbling across such a proposition in a widely circulated publication in, say, Stalinist Russia, when all citizens were instructed to dedicate all of their faculties to "building socialism" for the benefit of the collective. Yet Bestuzhev-Lada's essay coincided with a new phase in the national scientific establishment's relationship with science, technology, and concern for the individual. This generation of scientists differed from its predecessors who praised science, technology, and industry as part of a single path towards utopia. This early cohort of scientists operated under the assumption that industrialization would produce an array of economic and social benefits for the individual, including improved health, more leisure time, and the peace of mind that came with guaranteed employment. However decades of agonizing collectivization, grueling Five Year Plans, and heavy industrialization – not to mention a devastating Second

[57] Ibid, Bestuzhev-Lada.

[58] "Morlocks" and "Elois" are two fictional species featured in H.G. Wells' 1895 novel *The Time Machine*. In the book, "Morlocks" are described as ape-like, subterranean creatures that live with ancient machines that they may or may not have build. "Elois" are child-like, frail creatures that live above the Earth's surface and depend on the good, clothing, and infrastructure provided to them by the Morlocks. For more see H.G Wells, *The Time Machine* (New York: Tribeca Books, 1895).

World War – during the Stalin years challenged the merits of the seemingly indisputable correlation between modernization and individual wellbeing. Beginning in 1929, the Soviet man became a necessary yet replaceable tool in the process of "building socialism": all citizens were required to do their part to operate factories, build canals, and overhaul private agriculture.[59] The state, meanwhile, felt little obligation to provide for their subject's most basic needs. It was not uncommon, for example, for labor sites to suffer from dilapidated housing and poor sanitation, for factories to lack any pretense of safety regulations, and for government officials to requisition grain from families living on recently collectivized farms in times of famine.[60]

When Stalin died in 1953, the value of the individual stood at an all-time low, a situation that his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, failed to change completely during the course of his ill-fate term. His well-intentioned "destalinization"

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[59] The historian Stephen Kotkin, in his study of the industrial city of Magnitogorsk, cites a telegram sent by Stalin to city administrators congratulating them on the eve of the city's first furnace blasting. "I have no doubt that the Magnitogorsk workers will likewise successfully fulfill the main part of the 1932 program, will build three more blast furnaces, open-hearth furnaces, and rolling mills, and will thus fulfill with honor the duty of their country." Kotkin offers his astute interpretation of Stalin's message: "Everyone had the right to work; no one had the right not to work." See Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalin as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 201-2.

[60] For more on poor safety regulation at industrial sits such as Dneprostroi, Magnitostroi, and Belomorstroi, see Loren R. Graham, *The Ghost of the Executed Engineer: Technology and the Fall of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 49-66. For more on inferior conditions in industrial factories, see Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 201-215. For more on state-sanctioned grain requisitions during the Ukrainian famine Holodomor, see Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 21-58.

campaign included important political and social reforms, but his commitment to developing Russia's scientific, industrial, and especially technological sectors remained as steadfast as his predecessor's. The Second World War and rapid technological progress in the West had created a technological gap between East and West that Khrushchev was determined to eliminate. An intensifying Cold War made Soviet victory in this field all the more imperative. Just two years after he took office, Khrushchev used the occasion of his famous 1956 "Secret Speech" at the Twentieth Party Congress to echo Stalin by reiterating his commitment to accomplishing "the great task of building communism."[61] Over the next eight years, Khrushchev oversaw the completion of the Volga hydroelectric plant, a Seven Year Plan, and the construction of the city of Akademgorodok, a Siberian "city of science," where scientific experts, academics, and researchers were instructed to focus all of their energies to producing and teaching original scientific knowledge. The

Beginning in 1968, some of the country's leading scientists, including Andrei Sakharov and Andrei Tverdokhlebov, enlisted themselves as leaders of Russia's democratic movement. The dialogue they began spanned a wide range of issues, all of which could be placed into two broad categories: scientific and intellectual life, and universal human rights. For example, in his widely read article *Progress, Coexistence, and, Intellectual Freedom, and Peaceful Coexistence*, published after the

[61] Fordham University's Modern History Sourcebook, "Nikita S. Khrushchev: The Secret Speech – On the Cult of Personality, 1968," http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1956khrushchev-secret1.html, accessed April 21, 2012.

Soviet crackdown on Prague Spring in 1968, Sakharov synthesized his ideas about the "dangers linked with the scientific-technical revolution" and the "trinity of freedoms": freedom to obtain and distribute, information, freedom for open-minded and unfearing debate, and freedom from pressure by officialdom and prejudices.[62]

Around the same time that Sakharov wrote his article, other scientists were beginning to shed the widely held view that science and technology represented a panacea for society's many illnesses. Instead, they began to look for answers to questions about Russia's future in the technological age: how to reach that harmonious balance between man-made and machine made production; how to maintain a centralized state without stifling innovation; how to maximize collective output without compromising an individual's physical and emotional wellbeing. Critical interest in Vonnegut's dystopian science fiction reflected this reversal in attitudes towards science and technology and the birth of a new concern with the welfare of the individual. On the dawn of the 1970s, technological and scientific utopias were giving way to the utopia of human rights.[63]

[62] Andrei Sakharov, "Text of Essay by Russian Nuclear Physicist Urging Soviet-American Cooperation," 22 July, 1968, *The New York Times*, 14.
[63] For more on human rights as the "last utopia" of the twentieth century, see Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press at Harvard University Press, 2010).

Conclusion

As this report illustrates, to capture the essence of Vonnegut's reception in the U.S.S.R., one must place his literature in the context of Russian history before 1967, when Molodaia Gvardiia first published *Player Piano*, and the domestic and international conditions that existed in the Soviet Union during the 1970s, when Vonnegut's popularity reached its apex. It is impossible, for example, to comprehend the reasons for *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s critical success without taking into account the ideological roles that the memory of World War II played in building a postwar national identity. Likewise, technology's demotion from guarantor of progress in the 1910s to threat to humanity in the post-Stalin years helps explain *Player Piano*'s critical and ideological appeal during the early Brezhnev years, when the rhetoric of human rights first invaded the nation's scientific establishment. In all of these cases, Vonnegut's themes and storylines both reflected and expanded debates taking place on Soviet soil. These debates both conformed to and digressed from the official party line. All were colored, in one way or another, by the Cold War.

The history of Kurt Vonnegut's popularity in the U.S.S.R. is just one example of a new approach that scholars can take to study the relationship between the Soviet Union and the west during the 1970s. This approach illustrates the richness of Soviet-American cultural and ideological exchange and the extent of person-to-person bonds between east and west without ignoring the existence of an ongoing Cold War. In so doing, it challenges many of the assumptions on which so

much of the scholarship on U.S.-Soviet relations has been - and continues to be - based. All too often, scholars of U.S.-Soviet Cold War relations depict the relationship strictly in terms of conflict, a half-century long contest between disparate nation-states. Time and time again, they turn to figures like George F. Kennan, who described in his 1946 Long Telegram a Kremlin that viewed a world "divided into two irreconcilably hostile camps."[64] While this depiction certainly has its merits, it fails to capture the range of complexities that characterized the nearly fifty year long relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, complexities that involved more cooperation and mutual understanding than most scholars concede. When it came to Kurt Vonnegut's popularity, party writers and regular citizens alike found meaning in the ideas, themes, and lessons inside Vonnegut's novels and turned to them when they thought about their own country, its future, and its relationship with its western "adversary." His novels helped Russian readers realize that Vonnegut spoke their language, and they Vonnegut's.

In his Long Telegram, George F. Kennan warned U.S. policymakers that "the greatest danger that can befall us…is that we shall allow ourselves to become like those with whom we are coping."[65] What Kennan could not predict, and what his present-day intellectual champions fail to realize, is that protracted conflict

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[64] George F. Kennan, "George Kennan's 'Long Telegram' (Moscow-to-Washington) [February 22, 1946])," George Washington University, National Security Archive Online, http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm, accessed August 5, 2012.

[65] Excerpted from George F. Kennan's "Long Telegram," as quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 223.

eventually loses its meaning. When it does, people implicated in that conflict will search for meaning elsewhere. Beginning in 1967, Vonnegut's Russian readers embarked on a search for meaning in the unknown world of western literature. Ironically, through their search in the exotic worlds of Billy Pilgrim's "wanderings," Jonah's trip to San Lorenzo, and Paul Proteus' fight against technology, Vonnegut's Russian readers found something much more mundane but no less valuable: a reflection of their past, present, and future selves.

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VONN	Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN Vonnegut mss., 1941-2007
DMF	Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY Donald M. Fiene (1930-) Papers

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